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ABSTRACT

A continuing concern of theorists in composition and rhetoric has been the problem of how to design effective writing assignments. With the recent movement in writing assessment from objective tests to writing samples, this problem has become even more important for those who produce "tests" designed to elicit writing samples. A study therefore investigated whether the manner in which an assignment is stated affects the writing outcome. Four assignments (essentially the same assignment stated differently or more elaborately) were given randomly to 127 high school juniors and seniors in six different classes in two midwestern, suburban high schools. The four assignments were designed to test the claims of theorists such as Joseph Williams, E. M. Hoffman and J. P. Schifsky. The first assignment specified an imaginary audience and purpose and offered suggestions for planning and writing steps; the second assignment specified a "real" audience and purpose by "putting something real at stake"; the third assignment specified a general audience and purpose and brief criteria; the fourth did not specify any audience or purpose. Results showed no significant difference in the performance of students; those with the first assignment did as well and as poorly as those given the fourth. A multiple-choice questionnaire administered to the students after the writing test showed they did not value one assignment more than another. (Two tables of data are included; 18 references and the questionnaire are attached.) (TB)

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Does the Assignment Make a Difference? Four Variations of a Writing Task and Their Effects on Student Performance

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A continuing concern of theorists in composition and rhetoric has been the problem of how to design effective writing assignments. With the recent movement in writing assessment from objective tests to writing samples, this problem has become even more important for those who produce "tests" designed to elicit writing samples. If badly constructed assignments actually discourage students from doing the best writing they can, then conclusions about their writing ability will present inaccurate information to the community and will be useless in determining the directions classroom instruction should take.

Many theorists seem to agree that to produce the best possible results assignments should not include topics which encourage clichés (Alloway, 1980) nor should they involve tasks that are impossible for even good writers to perform successfully. These theorists also argue that assignments should be clear and purposeful, but their explanations of what characterizes a "clear" or "purposeful" assignment differ. Hairston (1982) argues that "the purpose each theme is to serve should be clearly stated at the beginning of the assignment." For an assignment such as "Compare and contrast the skills necessary for an engineer and those necessary for an architect," she suggests stating at the beginning a purpose such as "To demonstrate how the technique of comparison and contrast may be used to develop an argument."

On the other hand, a group of theorists argue that an assignment like Hairston's is artificial because the audience and purpose are atypical compared with writing in out-of-school contexts (Applebee, 1981). They claim that to be effective the assignment should explicitly state an audience, mode, and purpose (intention) more consistent with those of writing in out-of-school contexts (Lloyd-Jones, 1977; Odell, 1978; Kinneavy, 1971; Applebee, 1981; Martin et al, 1976; Tierney & Judy, 1972; Woodworth & Keech, 1980). These people argue that "the trouble with most school writing is that it is not genuine communication" (Martin et al, 1976). Students see school writing tasks as artificial exercises without any purpose except to show the teacher whether they can write, or as guessing games in which they must produce for the teacher information he or she already knows. Applebee (1981) explains that in this case school writing has an "atypical audience," and "when we create writing situations with atypical audiences, we destroy the normal intention to communicate and thus undermine in fundamental ways the whole learning process." Therefore, these theorists conclude that if assignments do not specify a real or imaginary audience besides the teacher or a purpose other than to show whether one can write, students will almost certainly write papers that are dull, aimless, and empty.

Research on Composing (1978) confirms the need for empirical data to determine whether students produce better writing when assignments contain these features. Odell, Cooper, and

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Courts (1978) ask:

> How should researchers frame a writing task so as to obtain the best possible work from students? Must researchers, as Sanders and Littlefield (1975) claim, provide a full rhetorical context, that is, information about speaker, subject, audience, and purpose? . . . Would an assignment that, for example, specified speaker, subject, and audience but not purpose elicit writing that differed significantly from writing prompted by an assignment that specified a full rhetorical context? . . . In all of these questions, we have been concerned with achieving assessment procedures that are valid, useful to students, and reasonably practical for researchers and teachers. . . . It seems important to find out whether we can make compromises that will let us have a valid but practicable means of assigning writing and assessing writing ability. (pp. 11-12)

Woodworth and Keech (1980) recently conducted an empirical study in which they hypothesized that the writing of students given assignments with a full rhetorical context would be rated significantly higher than the writing of students given assignments without a full rhetorical context. Students were randomly assigned three different wordings of the same topic--describe an experience. According to Woodworth and Keech,

one wording did not specify any purpose or audience; the second specified an imaginary audience and purpose ("Imagine you are writing for someone who is about to experience this activity for the first time."); and the third specified a real purpose and audience ("Write about this experience for a particular person who has not had such an experience. After this person has read your description, he or she should be prepared to undergo the experience. . . .[You will] deliver your paper to your reader so that he or she may respond."). The papers were rated for overall quality on a four point scale. The results of the ratings showed no significant difference in performance on the three assignments. These results certainly bring into question whether in a test situation specifying audience and purpose improves students' writing.

A study conducted by Baker and Quellmalz (1979) hypothesized that student performance would be better when students were given an assignment which included a picture as a source of information for writing than when they were given an assignment with only a written explanation. Both assignments specified an imaginary audience and purpose. The "general impression" scores and the total of all subscale scores revealed no significant difference in performance on the two assignments.

Though these results are convincing, there are still a few viewpoints related to this issue of assignment design that these studies do not test. In an article in English Journal, Hoffman and Schifsky (1977) claim that a good writing assignment "provides needed guidance from the prewriting

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through the writing through the rewriting stages. It provides a definite route through the assignment . . ." Thus, their assignments include step by step directions for planning that ask writers to think about certain questions and to generate and list specific kinds of data before writing the composition. They criticize an assignment such as "Defend/ Attack the E.R.A." because it does not provide "aim, audience, mode, tone, organization, or style." The question for empirical study is whether an assignment that specifies planning or "prewriting" steps will result in better writing than the same assignment without these steps included.

Still another approach to making assignments purposeful has been presented by Joseph M. Williams in a seminar on discourse analysis at the University of Chicago (Summer, 1982). To solve the problem of assignments that seem pointless to the student, he suggests that the assignment should be designed so that there is "something at stake" (other than just a grade on the paper). In explaining this idea, he says that there should be some potentially "real consequences" of doing a good or bad job in writing. This example illustrates an assignment in which "something is at stake." It is his alternative to the write-about-an-experience assignment.

> As your teacher during the year, I will have to give various kinds of recommendations about you concerning whether you receive certain school privileges, awards, honors, or memberships on athletic teams or in other activities. I feel that the better I understand you as a person the

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> fairer I can be to you in making these recommendations. Therefore, I would like you to write about an event and its consequences, that concerned you or someone you know. In your composition, describe the event so that you reveal to me something important about you as a person. I don't want to be amused or entertained. I want you to <u>use</u> the incident to explain to me something you think I should know about you that will help me understand you better.

In this assignment, at least within a school context, the student has something to gain from effective communication. Criticism by the teacher of such an assignment could also be rooted in the teacher's real world.

Williams' idea raises some questions. This assignment suggests a gain that could actually be realized by the student. If this kind of assignment encourages better writing and better teacher analysis, then would an assignment suggesting an imaginary stake have the same effect (eg. if the assignment said, "You are applying for a job, and the application requires that you describe an experience you have had that reveals in some way why you should be hired.")? In one sense, there is "something at stake" here, a job, but the student could feel that the situation is artificial because he is really not applying for a job. Then he does not really have anything at stake. Of these two possibilities, the first assignment seems to be unique in light of the theories

of assignment design presented in current works and one that has not yet been tested empirically to determine whether it encourages better writing.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether assignments that incorporate the characteristics suggested by these theorists will result in writing that is significantly better than writing resulting from assignments without these features. This study will include ways of stating assignments that were not examined in the Woodworth and Keech study. One assignment specifies an imaginary audience and purpose and planning steps; a second specifies a "real" audience and purpose by "putting something at stake"; the third assignment specifies a general audience and purpose and brief criteria; the fourth does not specify any audience or purpose.

To investigate whether any of the four assignments would result in better writing than the others, the researchers tested the following null hypothesis.

> There will be no significant difference between the four assignments in the overall quality scores given the compositions.

The Assignments

A

Think carefully about an event and its consequences, that concerned you or someone you know. Think about where this event took place. Jot down some details describing this place (sights, sounds, smells, etc.).

Try to remember what the people involved said.
List some of their statements or conversation.
What feelings did you or the person involved have?
List some details that describe these reactions.
Now, putting all of these ideas together, write
a paper in which you describe this event in detail.
Write your composition as if the reader will be a
friend whom you have not seen for a long time.
You want this person to understand something that
happened that had an impact on you.

B

(The assignment above that puts something at stake)

C

Write about an event and its consequences, that
concerned you or someone you know. Be as specific
as you can in describing the event and its
consequences. Try to write so that a reader of
your composition will see what you saw and feel
what you felt.

D

Write a composition about an event and its
consequences, that concerned you or someone
you know.

Assignment A is designed to include planning or "prewriting" directions as Hoffman and Schifsky (1977) suggest as well as

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an imaginary audience (other than the teacher) and purpose (as defined by Hoffman & Schifsky, Lloyd-Jones, Odell, Applebee, Kinneavy, Martin et al, Tierney & Judy, and Woodworth & Keech). Assignment B is an attempt to put "something at stake" for the student and provide potential consequences. Assignment C specifies the reaction the writer should produce in a reader and briefly suggests the criteria by which the assignment will be evaluated. This topic has been used by Hillocks (1979, 1982) in studies comparing students' writing performance before and after a sequence of observational activities. Assignment D does not specify any audience or purpose.

Procedures

This study involved 127 high school juniors and seniors in six different classes taught by three teachers in two midwestern, suburban high schools. The classes included a range of ability levels--below average seniors, average and above average juniors and seniors, and advanced placement honors seniors. In each class approximately equal numbers of each of the four assignments were distributed randomly among the students.

Students were given one 50-minute class period in which to write their compositions. Since several studies have indicated that students' performance on impromptu assignments written in time periods less than one hour was significantly lower than on assignments in which students had several hours to write or time outside of class to think about the assignment

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(Sanders & Littlefield, 1975 and Biola, 1982), the researchers instructed the participating teachers to give the assignments to students the day before the class period in which they would write. On this first day students put their names on the assignment sheet they were given and had approximately five to ten minutes to begin thinking about the assignment. The assignments were all collected before the end of class and returned to students the next day at the beginning of the class period so that students would have them when writing. As each student turned in his composition, the teachers marked on the assignment sheet the number of minutes remaining in the class period.

The assignments themselves were at no time read aloud to the students. During the class periods, students were not allowed to discuss among themselves their topics or ideas. Teachers informed students that their compositions would be graded.

To examine whether students' attitudes toward the assignment and their writing would differ among the four assignments, the researchers developed a questionnaire that was given to students the day following the class period in which they wrote their papers (see Appendix). The questionnaire included seven scale response items, one yes/no response item, and three free-response items. The scaled items asked students to place an X on each five-point scale to indicate their viewpoints. The scales had poles such as the assignment was boring (1) to interesting (5),

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strongly disagree that the assignment had a real purpose (1) to strongly agree that the assignment had a real purpose (5), and did not think about the reaction of the reader at all (1) to thought about the reaction of the reader a great deal (5). Students were asked to be honest in filling out the questionnaire and informed that their answers would have no bearing on the score their paper received and would not even be read until after the papers had been graded.

After the compositions were collected, the assignment sheets were removed and papers mixed so that there was no indication which papers were a result of which of the four assignments. All papers were rated by three teachers working independently. The three raters all had M.A.T. degrees in English and six to eight years of high school teaching experience. One of the raters also had several years of experience teaching college English. The raters were instructed to read all of the papers and place them in five different groups based on their overall quality (1-low and 5-high). They were directed to try not be be influenced by handwriting, mechanics, usage, and spelling, etc. Their final instructions were to read through papers in each of the five groups to be sure that all papers in a group represented a similar level of performance. After completing these steps, they wrote a description of the characteristics of papers in each group.

The three scores given to each paper were summed. Therefore, scores ranged from a low of three to a high of fifteen. Scores between the four assignments were tested

for significant difference using a one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and a Scheffé Test. The questionnaire results were analyzed by computing a mean score by assignment for each of the scale response items and adding the number of "yes" and "no" responses.

Results

The results of the one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) reported in Table 1 support the null hypothesis. The F score indicates that there is no significant difference at $p < .05$ between performance on the four assignments. The results of the Scheffé Test also reveal that no groups are significantly different at $p < .05$.

The student questionnaire results are reported in Table 2. There is little variation in the mean scores on each item among the four assignment groups. No assignment group appears to be significantly different, nor does any group have consistently higher or lower mean scores than the others.

Analysis of the time remaining in the class period when papers were turned in reveals that between ten and twelve papers written for each assignment were submitted five or more minutes before the end of class (A-12, B-10, C-12, D-11). Of these papers the number for each assignment turned in fifteen or more minutes before the end of class ranged from two to four (A-3, B-2, C-4, D-3). These results suggest that students did not spend significantly more time writing one assignment than another.

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TABLE 1

Results of One Way Analysis of Variance for Four Assignments

	A (Imaginary audience and purpose, pre-writing directions)	B (Real audience and purpose, something at stake)	C (General audience, brief criteria)	D (No audience or purpose specified)
Number of Papers	31	33	31	32
Mean Score	9.06	6.94	7.52	7.94
s^2 (Variance)	11.48	8.97	11.02	8.75

$F = 2.4725$

$df_1 = 3$

$df_2 = 123$

$p = .069$ (Not significant)

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TABLE 2

Mean Scores for Items on Student Questionnaire
For Four Assignments

	A (Imaginary audience and purpose, pre-writing directions) N=31	B (Real audience and purpose, something at stake) N=33	C (General audience, brief criteria) N=30	D (No audience or purpose specified) N=32
#1-Boring(1) to interesting (5)	3.38	3.30	3.32	3.41
#2-Would prefer different topic	18(No) 13(Yes)	18(No) 15(Yes)	14(No) 16(Yes)	21(No) 11(Yes)
#4-Real purpose, disagree (1) to agree (5)	3.45	3.74	3.49	3.35
#5-Thought about reader, not at all (1) to a great deal (5)	3.51	3.51	3.31	3.35
#6-Not at all important beyond h.s. (1) to very important (5)	2.87	3.25	2.80	3.08
#7-Very little effort (1) to very much effort (5)	3.68	3.60	3.82	3.47
10-Student's own rating, poor(1) to excellent(5)	3.18	3.28	3.41	3.24
11-How compares to other papers, much worse(1) to much better (5)	2.78	2.83	2.81	2.83

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Informal analysis of the descriptions the three raters wrote for each of the quality groups reveals that they described compositions in the highest group (5) as "getting across a point through use of significant detail," "presenting an original or significant insight about oneself or others," and being "creative and original." All three raters stated that these papers had a "tight focus" or "clear sense of direction." They each also described the papers as having a "strong impact on the reader." Two of the raters also explained that these top papers produced in the reader empathy or identification with the writer or characters. Other comments about the papers were that they contained "original comparisons and figurative language," "specific, vivid details," "effective dialogue," and "almost no clichés."

On the other hand, the raters described the papers in the lowest group (1) as "unfocused" and "pointless." All three also pointed out that the compositions contained "vague generalities" without any "supporting detail." One rater described the papers as "jumping from topic to topic," and another described them as "totally lacking impact or significance."

Discussion

The results of this study support the findings of Woodworth and Keech (1980): for assignments about personal experience, specifying a purpose and audience (other than

to show the teacher one can write) or giving the student "real consequences" by "putting something at stake" does not result in significantly better writing than not including any of these features in the assignment. The descriptions by the raters indicate that the best compositions had a clear sense of purpose and audience whereas the weak compositions lacked a sense of purpose and had little or no impact on the audience. And yet, there were compositions placed in the highest group that were written in response to the assignment with no specified purpose or audience. Therefore, at least some of the students exhibited a sense of purpose and audience when these were not suggested in the assignment itself. In addition, many compositions resulting from the assignments that <u>did</u> suggest a "real" purpose and audience were placed in the lowest group--the group of papers which were described as "pointless."

Furthermore, questionnaire means reveal that students gave Assignment D, the one with no explicit purpose or audience, close to the same score they gave the assignments with an explicit purpose and audience. Quite a few students who gave high scores on the "interest," "purpose," and "importance" scales wrote papers that received very low scores. And, likewise, several students who wrote high quality papers rated the assignment around "2" or below on either the "purpose" or "importance" scale. Therefore, perhaps specifying a full rhetorical context in the assignment is not at all what determines whether students perceive or write with a purpose.

These results have further implications in light of the widespread belief that assignments themselves have instructive potential. This belief is revealed in statements such as, "Assignments that are purposeful, audience-aware, and cumulatively structured, lead the student to understand the writing process" (Hoffman & Schifsky, 1977). Likewise, Jenkins (1980) states that when an assignment follows the guidelines she suggests, it "is no longer an obstacle. It is a vehicle, steadily moving a student toward writing fluency." However, the findings of this study and the Woodworth and Keech (1980) study suggest that specifying purpose and audience in the assignment does not provide any "instruction" that helps students write better. The notion of assignments themselves being instructive seems to assume that students have within them good writing skills; we just have to find a way to "draw them out." On the other hand, perhaps most students do not have the strategies needed for effective writing, and all our efforts to "draw them out" will continue to be fruitless no matter how we construct the assignment. Maybe our efforts would be better spent designing effective instructional activities to teach these writing strategies so that we would enable students to write well regardless of the assignment.

Some support for this conjecture can be found in the results of two studies by Hillocks (1979, 1982) in which Assignment 3 was used in a pre- and posttest design. (In one of the studies "event" was changed to "experience.")

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Students in experimental groups, who participated for ten to twenty days in a series of observational activities designed to help them attend to details and increase the sophistication of their perceptions (Hillocks, 1975), had statistically significant mean gains from pre- to posttest of two to five times those of control groups. Perhaps the key to improving students' ability to produce effective writing with direction, purpose, impact, and insight is not in the assignment but rather in the way instructional activities are designed.

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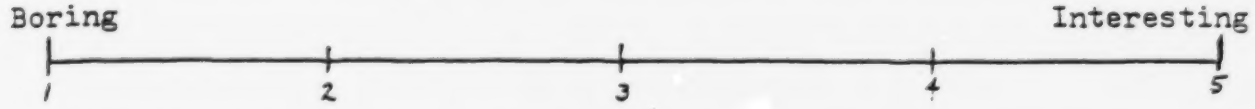
Appendix

Please Print Your NAME _____

Please place an X on the following scales to indicate your viewpoint. Also answer the other questions. These questionnaires will not be read until after your paper has been evaluated.

1. How would you rate the assignment you were given to write about?

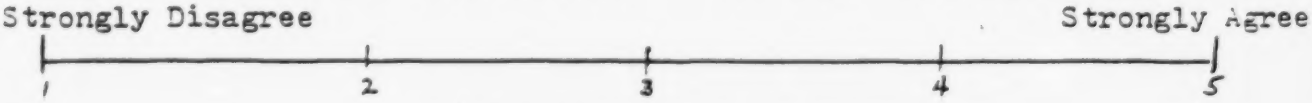


2. Would you have preferred to have been given a different topic to write on?

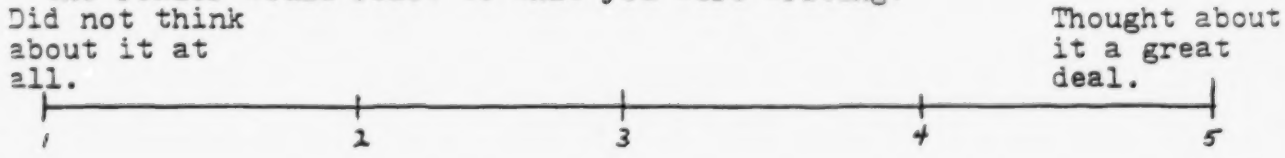
_____ Yes _____ No

3. If you answered "Yes" in Number 2, state what topic or assignment you would have preferred to have been given. If you answered "No," explain why you preferred the assignment you were given.

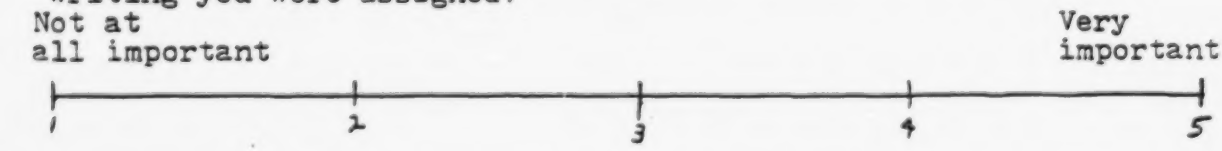
4. There seemed to be a real purpose for writing this assignment.



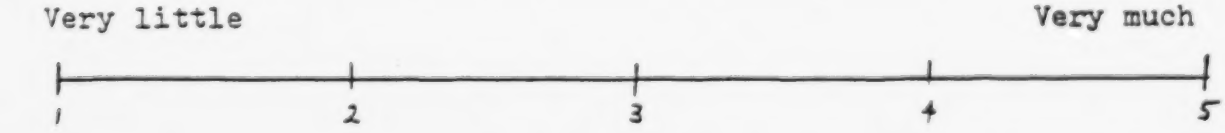
5. While you were writing, or thinking about the assignment, to what extent did you think about how the reader would react to what you were writing?



6. How important in your life beyond high school is the kind of writing you were assigned?



7. How much effort did you put into this assignment?

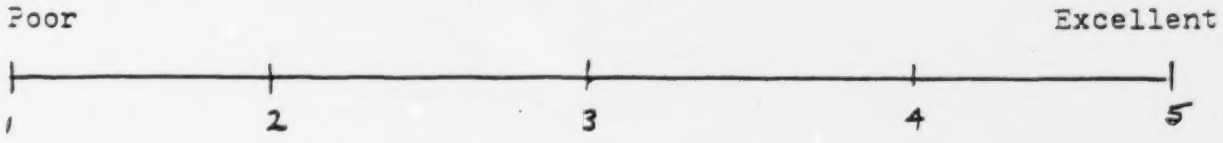


Appendix

8. Approximately how much time did you spend thinking about the assignment outside of class?

9. Do you feel you needed more time to write? Explain why or why not?

10. How would you rate the paper you wrote?



11. How does the quality of the paper you wrote compare to that of others you have written in the past?